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I N T R A P E R S O N A L C O M M U N I C A T I O N S

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INTRAPERSONAL COMMUNICATIONS

Somehow within every normal human being there is a conversation going on. This "talking" to one's self (or intrapersonal communication) doesn't normally spill over into lip-movements or audible sounds, but the sub-vocalization is nevertheless there. It is known as thinking.

As we grow from infancy to maturity our senses transmit to us a wide variety of specific messages, which are distilled into manageable bits of knowledge called concepts. "A concept is a generalized and abstract symbol; it is the sum of all our knowledge of a particular class of objects."¹

These concepts are distillations. What we know about reality are the various things that we remember as concepts. We internalize these abstractions and file them away, as it were, by means of words. Indeed, it is the existence of word-titles assigned to these concepts that permit this "filing" to take place on the scale that we call human.

...our primitive ancestor had no words with which to name and tell about things. He was speechless. His fellows knew no more than he did. Each one learned during his lifetime according to his capacity, but no instruction in our sense of the word was possible. What he saw and heard was not what we should have called seeing and hearing. He responded to situations in a blind and impulsive manner, with no clear idea of them. In short he must have thought

¹Gaston Vliard, Intelligence: Its Evolution and Forms Science Today Series (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1960), p. 74.

much as a wolf or bear does, just as he lived much like them.²

But all of this changed. It changed because man developed words. Somehow a sound could bring to mind a certain need that man could then seek to fulfill. If it was a need that required the cooperation of others of his tribe, that same sound could awaken in them the necessary cooperation. Man was the only animal capable of naming; and this skill, nurtured and fostered through countless centuries, brought man out of the caves and into the era of civilization that we know.³

Thinking, learning, remembering, knowing; imagining and creating new ideas; preserving and communicating knowledge over distances in time and space. Not only is it wonderful in its compass and variety: it is unique. It makes us human.⁴

It can be seen that it is this "naming" ability of man that is the key to his thinking. We can observe something, title it, and in referring to it by the abstract title (or concept) compare it with some other experience which is similarly titled. "Words and their relations become the transmitters of ideas and the guardians of memories."⁵

But this raises a question. Just how important is this internal conversation, this "talking to one's self," referred to earlier? If a person's capacity for accurate self-knowledge

²James Harvey Robinson, The Mind in the Making (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1921), p. 76.

³Mortimer J. Adler, The Difference of Man and the Difference It Makes (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), p. 112.

⁴Gilbert Highet, Man's Unconquerable Mind (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1954), p. 7.

⁵Viaud, Intelligence: Its Evolution, p. 42.

and for a realistic world-view depends directly on his ability to think, which in turn depends on his ability to use words, then intrapersonal communication skills become central to everything a man does that goes beyond mere instinct. A man's thought processes are almost completely dependent upon his ability to use words.⁶ (This was brought home to me when, in 1960, the psychologist at the George Washington University Vocational Testing and Counselling Center indicated that all of the tests that I had taken there and the skills they indicated tied directly into the score I had on the language-usage portion of the tests. Even non-verbal tests require persons to be adept at intrapersonal communication.)

What is reciprocal here in the relation of language and thought is only that each is a necessity--a sine qua non--condition of the development of the other: man could not exercise his power of articulate speech unless he had the power of conceptual thought; he could but barely exercise his power of conceptual thought did he not have the use of words and sentences.⁷

Since the chaplain is by the very nature of his work a communicator, the importance of words plays a double-barreled role in his vocation. The obvious role is seen in the interpersonal communication that is his stock in trade as he preaches, counsels, and works with the moral and morale problems of the military. However, the obvious role is not the primary role. If the chaplain is a communicator, then it is what he has to

⁶Jon Eisenson, ed., The Psychology of Communication (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1963), p. 197. Adler, The Difference of Man, p. 136.

⁷Adler, The Difference of Man, p. 139.

say that is primary, and he can say only what he as a person knows by experience. It is this "knowing by experience" which returns us immediately to the internal conversation by means of which man acquires and makes sensible his experiences.

An adequate power to express oneself is not a literary frill with which to decorate the edges of life. On the contrary, it is the indispensable tool of our self-understanding and self-acceptance, and of our rational contact with the world around us.⁸

Perhaps a case could be made for an appeal to all chaplains to spend much time talking to themselves; and it is strongly possible that one of the lesser explored values of personal prayer is found in the specific opportunity afforded the person praying to engage in trying to come to a realistic understanding of himself through intrapersonal communication. In this connection it needs to be noted that "As our self-concepts grow more realistic, our actions and decisions become progressively wiser,..."⁹ and a chaplain needs to have tremendous wisdom as he deals with people.

The perspective from which all reality is perceived is found within the person.¹⁰ This is the basis from which the Socratic injunction to "Know thyself" gains its impact. Thus the relationship between a chaplain's self-knowledge and his subsequent ability to act as an effective minister is obvious. Likewise Descartes' "I think thus I am." is the logical

⁸Harry and Bonare Overstreet, The Mind Alive (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1954), p. 48.

⁹S. I. Hayakawa, Language in Thought and Action (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1964), p. 324.

¹⁰C. G. Jung, The Undiscovered Self (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1958), p. 46.

foundation upon which man builds the rest of his understanding of the world.

What one knows of himself can never be complete, simply because we have neither the perspective nor the objectivity to see ourselves clearly. "...one's self-concept omits an enormous of one's actual self. We never know ourselves completely."¹¹ Nevertheless it is important for the chaplain to search out the false images that he has concerning himself, because in direct proportion to the amount that these false images are visible to others the chaplain's credibility suffers.

Can we do anything to achieve a greater realism about ourselves? It is important that we do, because those who cannot be realistic about themselves are as a rule also incapable of being realistic about their relations with other people.¹²

In seeking self-knowledge one finds himself thrust back to relying upon words, for "...we cannot define our feelings and actions, account for them, evaluate them, take command of them, or recall them when they are past except as we audibly or silently put them into words."¹³ Words are the means of a man's testing his own experiences against the experiences of other men. As his experience is verified or denied, in part or in whole, the individual's internal concept of himself is reinforced, remade, or rejected. In the passage of time the person becomes more and more capable of judging his current experiences against the remembered experiences (both his own

¹¹Hayakawa, Language in Thought, p. 321.

¹²Ibid., p. 322.

¹³Overstreet, The Mind Alive, p. 38.

and others') by means of words.

Our capacity to build a life that is whole and sound is... inextricably tied up with our capacity to made adequate use of words. Conversely, a disordered life--one that is marked by conflicts, inconsistencies, and unhealed emotional wounds--is one in which attitudes and behaviors are repeatedly dictated by states of feeling never made explicit in words but left hidden away from all contact with rational processes of mind.¹⁴

It is evident that the path to interpersonal competency lies in the opportunity for intrapersonal communication. As a person is able to refine his self-concepts by reflecting on the reactions of others to him, he becomes better able to adjust dysfunctional aspects of his own behavior and to come to a consistent self-image that accurately reflects his own capabilities while giving him the greatest opportunity for a successful adjustment to his environment.¹⁵

Obtaining this successful adjustment through a consistent self-image is extremely important for all men, but it is particularly vital for the chaplain. For example, when the chaplain ministers to men in a combat situation, men who are lonely and far from home, it is axiomatic that the chaplain is similarly in the combat situation, lonely, and far from home. In high-stress situations men begin asking the deep questions of life's purposes, and trying to find some sort of meaning in the irrational conditions that surround them.

In this situation the chaplain is an obvious source of assistance--just so long as what he has to say actually ties

¹⁴Ibid., p. 39.

¹⁵William E. Buys and others, "Speech Communication in the High School Curriculum," The Speech Teacher (from the files of Chaplain H Ackermann).

in with a reality that can be understood and accepted by those seeking the chaplain's help. But how does the chaplain himself discover an understandable reality?

It is no accident that the idea of "Word" is prominent in the scriptures, for one of the primary inner resources for the chaplain is found in the sustaining power of his own personal faith. Indeed, the New Testament points indirectly to the overwhelming importance of intrapersonal words when it indicated that in their failure it is the Holy Spirit himself who speaks in sighings too deep to be uttered.¹⁶ Here the chaplain from the Christian heritage can find strength even when his own words fail. In addition,

Words serve therapeutic--that is, helpful, restorative--ends when they are the tools by which the disturbed individual brings back within the frame of his conscious understanding "lost" experiences and unacknowledged feelings that have shaped his reactions to life without his knowing they were doing so. They serve therapeutic ends, also, when they are the tools by which the patient, as he moves toward health, builds a new concept of himself, of the life he can reasonably lead, and of the world around him and the people in it.¹⁷

Thus an ability for intrapersonal communication helps the chaplain obtain a consistency in his understanding of reality, even under stress, insofar as his personal world view adequately deals with the varieties of situations in which he finds both himself and those to whom he ministers. Since "...clarification of the problem in words becomes clarification of it in mind,"¹⁸ the chaplain must constantly strive to im-

¹⁶Romans 8:26.

¹⁷Overstreet, The Mind Alive, p. 36.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 41.

prove his ability with words, seeking out more and more precise methods of speaking to increase his own understanding of the world around him.

For a man to be alone in the mountains and find pleasure, security, and personal growth requires a highly developed skill of enjoying being with one's self. Such skills are intra-personal communication skills and need to be taught.¹⁹

The same sense of isolation can be found on a battlefield, and although pleasure and enjoyment are not nearly so likely to be obtained there, yet there can be achieved through intrapersonal communication skills a certain rationality and stability of emotions and feeling that can make the best of even bad situations.

In any case, inner-communication skills are skills that can be developed. As they are developed, men become better able to orientate themselves properly to the world in which they live. "In fact, we recall the past by word-associations... Human memory becomes organized, and can be used, by virtue of speech alone."²⁰ Thus the chaplain's (and the soldier's) training comes easier to mind through intrapersonal communication skills. At the same time there is a relationship to be found in a man's ability to look forward to a realistic future as his word-association skills improve. "...there is a strong connection between imagination and memory--the better the memory, the more reliable is the anticipation of the future."²¹

¹⁹ Buys, "Speech Communication in the High School Curriculum," The Speech Teacher, p. 299.

²⁰ Viard, Intelligence: Its Evolution, p. 82.

²¹ Ibid., p. 84.

9

As the chaplain's intrapersonal communication skills develop, he becomes a better minister and counselor, and even when he ministers in trying situations he is able to recall from the past and project into the future those items of experience that are best suited to meet the needs of the present. The key to an adequate ability to do this is found in intrapersonal communication abilities.

The data of experience...are full of contradictions....Unordered, and bearing no relationship to each other, our statements about experience are not only disconnected, but they are difficult to use.

Insofar as we are aware of these contradictions, this disorder among our statements is itself a source of tension. Such contradictions provide us with no guide to action; hence they leave us with the tensions of indecision and bewilderment. These tensions are not resolved until we have, by talking to ourselves about our talking (symbolizing our symbols), "fitted things together," so that, as we say, things don't seem to be meaningless any more. Religion, philosophies, science, and art are equally, and through different methods, ways of resolving the tensions produced by the contradictory data of experience by talking about our talking, then talking about our talking about our talking, and so on, until some kind of order has been established among the data.²²

It is just to such an endeavor the chaplain must find time to apply himself, for in some way he must be able to help others find reason for their existence; and this means he must have found reason--or found God, the source of all reason--first.

²²Hayakawa, Language in Thought, p. 153.

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